



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

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Softbills

(The name describes the type of food they consume.)

Keeping and breeding softbills is a specialised area of aviculture. In this article respected softbill expert BRADLEY R. HOLLAND explains the intricacies of keeping birds which require more than a seed diet.

I live in Sydney, where we are very lucky in that we are able to keep and care for a fairly large range of birds called softbills.

No, the term softbill doesn't mean that their bills are soft; it's more to do with the type of food they eat. Softbills don't crack seeds like parrots, cockatoos and lovebirds, although some eat a small amount of seed whole.

They are more likely to eat insects, nectar (species includes honeyeaters), fruit, vegetables, meat and fish.

So are owls, eagles and hawks softbills? No. They're classified as raptors and most probably enjoy eating the odd softbill if given the chance.

In this article I'll go through some of the aviary species we have at our place as well as types of food, some of the plans and some of the mixed housing arrangements.



Housing

The largest aviary is approximately 14m long x 5m wide and 5m high and the smallest is 3m long x 1.5m wide x 2m high. Aviaries are planted except those containing cockatoos, lorikeets and one which has Barbary doves and Bul Buls. The catbird and satin bowerbird aviaries aren't planted, although creepers grow on the outside and into the aviaries until the occupants decide to prune them.

Two aviaries contain ponds in which our waterfowl and stilts spend a lot of time. The ponds are useful in allowing us to place meat in the middle, keeping it away from ants, which are an occasional pest.

One of the ponds contains tortoises; both have tadpoles and lemna waterweed. Kingfishers and stilts get great enjoyment eating the tadpoles when they can catch them.

Diet

The most important thing when considering whether or not to keep softbills is the time required to feed them (preparation of some of their diets is more time consuming than the feeding itself) and the cost involved in feeding them. It's okay when you've got a pair or two of wrens or honeyeaters, but collections usually grow very quickly.

It doesn't seem expensive when you can breed the mealworms yourself.

It's when you get to the point of having to buy all the other dietary requirements that it starts adding up. Softbills don't make you money – a few people sell their stock but most softbill keepers are more prone to swapping for other birds instead of cash.



Live food

Mealworms, white ants, cockroaches, flies, gentles, pupae, moths and anything else you can attract into the aviary, including fruit flies, etc.

Nectar

For some of the honeyeaters we buy artificial nectar. Others – like the blue-faced honeyeaters – prefer lorikeet wet mix which is brown sugar, beef stock cube, water and a few drops of Pentavite. These wet mixes are fed in brightly coloured D cups or drip drinkers like they use for mice and guinea pigs.

Pre-made diets

Softbill diet:

- 2 pkts milk arrowroot biscuits
- 2 pkts shredded cheese
- 1 doz hard-boiled eggs with shells
- 1 kg dog biscuits
- 1 loaf multigrain bread
- 2 cups fly pupae

Place all the ingredients in a blender, blend until moist, crumbly feel. Store in lunch bags in the freezer and feed as required.

Insectivorous cake:

- 6 - 8 eggs with shells
- 250 grams melted butter
- 250 - 300 grams raw sugar
- 2 tablespoons sunflower oil

Mix in blender before adding dry ingredients.

- 750 grams self-raising flour
- 500 grams cottage cheese
- 2 dessertspoons of baking powder

Mix all ingredients and bake in an oven for minimum one hour, more if needed, at 150°Celsius. When cool slice into quantity used and wrap and store in the freezer.

Meat softbill diet:

- 450 grams minced heart (use heart because it is low in fat)
- 500 grams grated cheese
- 1 kg Lucky Dog biscuits (dry)

Soak dry dog biscuits for an hour in hot water – just enough to cover biscuits. Then add cheese and minced heart and mix thoroughly. These diets are good for pied stilts, buff banded rails, plovers, curlews, glossy ibis, kookaburras and pheasant coucals.

Dry nectar mix:

- 1 pkt rice cereal
- 2 cups rice flour
- 2 cups egg and biscuit
- 1 cup glucose

Depending on what the aviary houses we usually have chook pellets and dry dog biscuits available at all times to bigger softbills. We also use apples, oranges, pears, avocados (not poisonous to softbills), bananas and most soft fruits depending on seasonal availability.

We also use soaked sultanas, frozen peas, corn and carrots – taken out of the packet and soaked overnight in water. Also a lot of Madeira cake, which we get cheap when it's out of date from bakers or shops.

The diets are varied according to what species are in the aviary and they are rotated, with the birds getting insectivorous cake one day and Madeira cake the next.

For meat eaters such as stilts and kingfishers we use roo mince because the fat content is almost non-existent. Some members of the Softbill Society use high quality beef mince.



Aviary Plants

Most of our aviaries are planted to make the birds feel safe and secure as well as providing food from plants which grow berries and have flowers to supply nectar or attract insects. Plants also help aviaries blend into the garden, making them a little more pleasing to the eye.

A few things to think about when planting aviaries include:

Don't plant under perches (especially broad-leafed varieties).

Consider how high plants will grow (you don't want them coming through the roof).

What is the root system like?

Powder Puff Lilly Pilly (*Syzygium wilsonii*) 2m x 2m have large red wine flowers in spring-summer, occasionally bear fruit.

Native Gardenias grow to 4m high and will flower in the shade, scented white flower.

Pschotrias is a small under-story shrub with edible berries.

Orange Thorn (*Pittosporum multiflorum*) is a dense, thorny shrub with tiny leaves, bright orange fruit like miniature oranges, grows to 2m, good shelter shrub for wrens.



Aviary birds

Once you have your aviary built and planted out, and you have decided on some of the types of softbills you would like to house, then you may realise that you might like to place some other birds in the aviaries or even mix a couple of types of softbills.

Some of the different mixes in our aviaries are:

Satin bowerbirds and catbirds – these prey on each other's eggs.

Blue-faced honeyeater and Spinifex pigeons (blue-face will kill wrens, silver eyes and finches).

Whip birds, bleeding heart pigeons, splendid wren, pied stilts, sacred kingfishers, New Guinea ground doves, brush bronze-wings, squatters, numerous finches, purple-crowned fruit pigeon, silver eyes, plumed honeyeater and spiny-cheeked. When splendid wrens weren't in this aviary red-back wrens or superb blue wrens replaced them.

Yellow-tufted honeyeaters with rose crowned and purple-crowned fruit pigeons.

Shiny starlings, northern fig birds and white-eared honeyeaters.

Scarlet honeyeaters and sunbirds.

Crimson chat red cap robins, diamond sparrow and diamond doves.

Lewin honeyeater, shiny starling, fig bird, oriole, New Holland honeyeater, baldy pigeon, topknot fruit pigeon, Torres pigeon, common and bush bronze-wing, noisy pitta, grass whistling duck, crested pigeon, green-wing pigeon, brown pigeon, princess parrot Senegal doves and even a couple of long nosed potoroos, a small type wallaby or rat kangaroo.

Striated grass wren, inland dotterel, orange chats, green pygmy geese and mandarin ducks.

There are other mixed groups and some aviaries have had other types of softbills in them at some point in time, but the most important thing is to research the type of birds and watch them when they have been placed in aviaries.

References:

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